DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 219 817 CS 503 896

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TITLE Voter Involvement in the 1980 Presidential Election.
PUB DATE May 82
NOTE 19p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the International Communication Association (Boston, MA, May 2-5, 1982).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Elections; *Information Sources; *Mass Media Effects; *Media Research; Newspapers; News Reporting; *Political Influences; Radio; *Television; Television Commercials; Voting
IDENTIFIERS *Media Use; Presidential Campaigns

ABSTRACT

A study explored the relationship between voters' involvement in political elections and their reactions to different media as sources of political information. Data were gathered from 246 telephone interviews conducted 1 month prior to the 1980 United States presidential campaign. Respondents were asked to (1) name political issues discussed in the campaign, (2) evaluate the importance of each issue, (3) indicate an intention to vote, (4) evaluate the degree of similarity or difference among the candidates, and (5) indicate their likelihood of voting for each candidate. They also provided demographic information, indications of political party preference, extent of media use, and opinions concerning the usefulness of television advertising as opposed to television news as a source of political information. Results showed that highly involved voters were aware of issues and their importance, intended to vote, and saw differences between the candidate they supported and other candidates. These voters actively chose television news as the most useful source of political information. Voters with low political involvement also relied heavily on the electronic media for their information; however, they found political advertising to be more useful than news reporting as an information source. (A copy of the questionnaire used in the study is appended.) (FL)

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VOTER INVOLVEMENT IN THE 1980 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

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POLITICAL COMMUNICATION,
INTERNATIONAL COMMUNICATION ASSOCIATION
BOSTON, MASSACHUSETTS

MAY 1-5, 1982

CS503896

VOTER INVOLVEMENT IN THE 1980 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

National political communication strategies center around television advertising to reach the uncommitted voter. Thirty or 60-second commercials may succeed in exposing inactive voters to political candidates and issues because they are viewed between segments of entertainment programming. Explanations for the success of television spots suggest that uncommitted voters are less involved in the political process, television is a low involvement medium, and advertising requires less involvement than news for acquiring political information. Some recent studies have found, however, that uncommitted voters are not inattentive and apathetic, but are characterized as ticket splitters and independent voters who depend heavily upon media coverage to make an electoral decision. This paper attempts to identify and classify voters' level of political involvement and explore the relationships between level of political involvement and media influences on voting decisions in the 1980 Presidential election.

Although involvement has been measured using a variety of operational definitions, a universally acceptable measure has failed to emerge. Nasser and McEwin (1976), for example, measured involvement by classifying the modality of the message channel, while Krugman (1966) counted the number of connections between the persuasive stimulus and something in the respondent's life. A third approach by Rothchild and Ray (1974) categorized involvement according to level of political race, i.e., local, state, or national. It is the position of this paper that these previous distinctions are too parsimonious for this multi-faceted variable.

To be sure, some definitions in recent research do provide a more composite picture of involvement. In an experiment concerning subject choice among brand names, Tybejee (1979) developed an index of product involvement. Operational measures were obtained for product importance, cognitions, attitude, and receptivity to new information about the product. Factor analysis yielded a scale which compared individual differences in product decision making and a more complex, four-part index of involvement.

Mulder (1979) used a multiple variable measure of involvement in the 1975 Chicago mayoral election by asking voters for their degree of attention to, and enjoyment of, newspaper and television campaign coverage. These

cognitive and affective responses were summed to create an index of political involvement.

A common thread among these multi-variate studies are their references to the cognitive, affective, and conative dimensions of involvement. Concerning the cognitive variable Krugman (1966) described this dimension of involvement as the conscious bridging of content to previous personal experiences. Similarly Grunig (1978) saw involvement partially as the extent to which the person cognitively connects himself with a situation. Thus, in a political situation, for example, the more campaign issues a voter can remember, the more cognitively involved (s)he is in the election. On the other hand, less knowledge of the issues point to less cognitive involvement.

In addition to the cognitive dimension, involvement includes an affective dimension. The affective property of involvement was defined in terms of intensity, or degree of importance information has on one's personal experience (Nasser and McEwen, 1976, Tybeejee, 1979 and Mulder, 1979).

Preston (1970) also recognized a conceptual weakness in measuring involvement using the single cognitive component. He suggests that an attitudinal dimension--degree of importance or salience should be included. The measurement of political involvement solely through information recall, for example, ignores the impact of voters' evaluation of the information. Some voters may be able to readily cite or recall campaign issues but find the issues detached or irrelevant to their personal agendas. Thus, in addition to recall of issues, involvement should include a measure of intensity or affective reactions toward those issues.

A third dimension of involvement is the conative element--an opportunity, or lack of opportunity, to behaviorally respond to a belief of supportive attitude. Rothchild and Ray (1974) and Swinyard and Coney (1978) used such a conative element as a basis for determining political involvement. On the same dimension both Tan (1980) and Zimmer (1981) identified level of active participation as a component of electoral involvement. The assumption was that voters who participate in the campaign and/or appear at the polls on election day were more politically involved than those who did not.

While the cognitive, affective and conative dimensions have been the major focus of involvement measures, a fourth dimension has been offered. Specifically involvement has been defined as the degree of perceived difference between alternatives or choices. Ray (1973) indicated that voters who perceived greater differences between candidates reveal greater potential involvement, while fewer perceived differences reflects lower involvement. Similarly Preston (1970) labeled involvement as the extent to which an individual is concerned about the matter of selecting among various choices he might make. If two political candidates, for example, are perceived as having indistinguishable platforms and leadership qualities, a voter might be equally satisfied (or dissatisfied) with either candidate. Such a situation is reflective of low political involvement such as Zimmer's (1981) attempt to correlate political involvement with perceived closeness of an election. Zimmer labeled involvement as (1) interest in the election, (2) attempt to influence someone's vote in the election, and (3) voting in the election. But this measure of involvement, which includes affective and behavioral components, failed to correlate with beliefs that the elections would be close in the 1968 and 1972 Presidential election.

Finally, a fifth dimension of involvement is the extremity of the position taken in an issue. Sherif and Sherif (1967) operationally defined involvement as the size of Ss latitudes of rejection, noncommitment, and acceptance. As the extremity of one's position increased, i.e., strongly agree or disagree on a given issue, the latitudes of acceptance and noncommitment decreases and the latitude of rejection increases. Thus, an extreme position, for example, reflects a highly involved position.

The present study offers two departures from previously cited research. First, while earlier studies have argued for a multi-faceted approach to involvement, none have actually attempted to operationalize involvement using the more content valid multi-variate conceptualization justified earlier. For example, Gruning (1978) conceptually recognized both a cognitive and a behavioral component of involvement, his operational definition, however, was the extent to which a person perceives himself as connected with objects in a situation (p. 111), which is actually a single-dimension measurement. It would seem reasonable that if the study of involvement is to achieve external validity, researchers would attempt to measure

and correlate involvement with dependent variables which encompass its multi-dimensional nature, rather than its various parts.

Secondly, the variety of involvement definitions make discerning predictable media behaviors a difficult task. Previous findings suggest that high involvement is associated both with the print medium, as opposed to television, and news as opposed to the advertising format. It would also seem appropriate to determine if a multi-dimensional conceptualization of involvement will predict similar media outcomes. A review of media habits which correlate with past studies of involvement is reported in the following section.

INVOLVEMENT AND MEDIA USE

Krugman (1966) found that involvement for advertising tends to be higher for magazines than for television with high involvement products, but no different with low involvement products. Nasser and McEwen (1976) also found print to generate more involvement than videotape.

Using three categories of degrees of brand differentiation in advertising as a measure of involvement, Preston (1970) found that television was less involving than magazines and that all advertising produces relatively low involvement in comparison with other types of messages. He concluded that advertising does not operate at a high level of involvement because it does not often involve brand discrimination.

Rothchild and Ray (1974) acknowledged the multi-dimensional nature of involvement including the following variables--closeness of a political race, volatility of the candidates and the issues, the voter's commitment to a position, participation in the election, volunteering to work for a candidate, information about the campaign, and attitudes about the candidates. They argued that highly involved voters have a composite dimension--cognitive, affective, and conative. The low involved possess a cognitive and conative component but not an affective component. The purpose of their study however, was not designed to test this assertion, but to determine if various types of elections and advertising could be predicted by the two involvement models. The significant findings were that the high involvement composite dimension was present in the high involvement (presidential) election and highly

involved voters had a negative response to advertising in terms of voting intent in the presidential race.

Swinyard and Coney (1978) compared political canvassing and direct-mail advertising in both a high involvement and a low involvement election races. They defined a high involvement race as a U.S. Senatorial race and a low involvement race as a county treasurer election. The findings confirmed earlier studies. Advertising had an observable effect on the low involvement race but not on the high. Advertising had the greatest impact on recall, followed by voting intentions and then attitude. It was not shown, however, that personal canvassing had a main effect in either the high or low involvement races.

The comparative effects of television political advertisements and news coverage was considered by McClure and Patterson (1974). In terms of political advertising, they found that ads about a candidate's position were more influential with voters with low interests in the campaign than with voters with high interest. The smaller effect of ads on high interest voters is attributed to the fact that high interest voters would more likely expose themselves to other sources, thus diminishing the effect of the ads. Overall, their data indicate that exposure to television news affect voter belief change less directly, less consistently, and less strongly than exposure to television advertising.

Although Tan (1980) found a positive relationship between knowledge of political issues and campaign participation, thus linking a cognitive component with a behavioral component of political involvement, he did not attempt to correlate either component with mass media use. He did report, however, that interpersonal discussion correlated significantly with acquisition of political information from newspapers but not television.

The studies cited point to two fairly consistent findings concerning involvement. First, high involvement is associated with print media as opposed to radio or television. Thus, it is expected that highly involved voters would find print media to be their primary sources of information about a political campaign. Second, low involvement is associated with advertising as opposed to news. Further, it is expected that in a political campaign low involved voters would find television advertising more useful than television news.

RESEARCH HYPOTHESES

The review of literature described above suggests two assumptions and four major research hypotheses areas. This section describes the assumptions and hypotheses.

ASSUMPTION I: A consistant finding is that television has emerged as the most important source of information for news. One assumption of this study is that both high and low involved respondants will prefer television to all other sources for political information.

RESEARCH HYPOTHESES AREA I: This study assumes that a high involved individual will actively seek information regarding the area of involvement, in this case the 1980 national Presidential election. Further, it is predicted that such an active search would direct the highly involved individual to seek detailed information. Since the print media typically provides such detail the following specific research hypotheses were established.

$H_{1.1}$: Respondents classified as high involved will significantly use newspapers more as a source of information than will respondents classified as low involved.

$H_{1.2}$: Respondents classified as high involved will significantly use magazines more as a source of information than will respondents classified as low involved.

RESEARCH HYPOTHESES AREA II: Low involved individuals are less likely to exert a great deal of effort to gain information regarding the area of low involvement, in this case the 1980 presidential election. Electronic media has been consistently identified as media requiring less effort on the part of the recipient than print media. This study investigated three specific electronic media sources and established the following research hypotheses.

$H_{2.1}$: Respondents classified as low involved will significantly use television news more as a source of information than will respondents classified as high involved.

$H_{2.2}$: Respondents classified as low involved will significantly use

radio more as a source of information than will respondents classified as high involved.

$H_{2.3}$: Respondents classified as low involved will significantly use television political ads more as a source of information than will respondents classified as high involved.

RESEARCH HYPOTHESES AREA III: People who are low involved in a topic area are more likely to rely on the opinions of others to gain information. This assumption, if true, would result in the following research hypotheses.

$H_{3.1}$: Respondents classified as low involved will significantly use discussions/conversations more as a source of information than will respondents classified as high involved.

ASSUMPTION II: A rather obvious assumption made by this study was that both high and low involved individuals would find television news a more useful source of information than the paid political ads of the various candidates. In order to substantiate this assumption this study predicted that both high and low involved respondents would rate television news as a significantly more useful source of information regarding the presidential election when compared to the perceived usefulness of paid political ads.

RESEARCH HYPOTHESES AREA IV: Within the framework of the television media, television news is assumed to be more detailed than paid political ads. Television news also requires more time, and as such require more effort from the viewer. Consequently this study established the following specific research hypotheses.

$H_{4.1}$: Respondents classified as high involved will significantly rate television news as a more useful source of information that will respondents classified as low involved.

$H_{4.2}$: Respondents classified as low involved will significantly rate television paid political ads as a more useful source of information than will respondents classified as high involved.

This section described the two assumptions made by this study and the four resultant research hypotheses areas. The following section describes the research method used to test these assumptions and hypotheses.

METHOD

Data were gathered utilizing telephone responses to pre-election questionnaires. The sample was drawn through random digit dialing. Calls were placed at all times of the day with each working residence number called once in the morning, afternoon and evening before being discarded. During the period October 2-8, 246 telephone interviews were completed. Each interview required approximately 10-15 minutes.

The questionnaire contained five questions specifically designed to measure political involvement according to the dimensions previously described. Each respondent was asked to name political issues discussed in the campaign, evaluate the importance of each campaign issue, to indicate an intention to vote or not vote, to evaluate the degree of similarity or difference among the candidates and to indicate likelihood of voting for each candidate. In addition to demographic information, other measures were party preference, media use, and usefulness of television advertising versus television news. Regarding media use, six media were listed to be rank ordered by the respondents according to their importance as a source of political information. Relative usefulness of television advertising and news was measured by responses to a bipolar scale. A copy of the questionnaire is found in Appendix A.

RESULTS

This study contained two assumptions and four major research hypotheses areas. The research hypotheses tested, the various data analysis techniques used, and the consequent results are reported below.

ASSUMPTION I: Television will be the most used source of information regarding the 1980 Presidential election for both high and low involved subjects.

In order to test this assumption respondents were asked to rank order six sources of information they might use in forming their opinions about the various candidates. Results show that both high and low involved subjects ranked television news as their more used source of information. Table 1 reports the results of this analysis.

Since television news was consistantly ranked as the most used source

of information by a significant proportion of respondents Assumption I was supported.

TABLE I

SUMMARY OF MEDIA USE: BY RANK

RANK	HIGH INVOLVED	LOW INVOLVED
I	Television News	Television News
II	Newspapers	Newspapers
III	Radio	Radio
IV	News Magazines	Television Advertising
V	Discussions/Conversations	Discussions/Conversations
VI	Television Advertising	News Magazines

HYPOTHESES AREA I: This study predicted that high involved individuals would use the two print media sources significantly more than would respondents classified as low involved. The predictions were tested by comparing the means of the results reported by the respondents concerning the media they use as an information source. Mean comparisons of high vs. low involvement for newspaper use produced a *t*-value of 0.12 with 244 d.f., which was not significant beyond the .05 level. Mean comparisons of high vs. low involvement for newsmagazine use produced a *t*-value of 0.25, d.f., 244 which was not significant beyond the .05 level. Neither finding supported the research hypothesis.

HYPOTHESES AREA II: This study predicted that low involved individuals would use the three electronic media sources listed in the survey significantly more than would respondents classified as high involved. These predictions were tested by comparing the means of results reported by respondents concerning the electronic media they use as an information source. Results of mean comparisons showed that low involved used television news, radio, and television advertising significantly more than did the high involved. All *t*-values were significant beyond the .05 level, thus supporting the research hypothesis.

HYPOTHESES AREA III: This study predicted that individuals who are low involved are more likely to seek information from others, than would high involved individuals. This prediction was tested by comparing the means of

results reported by respondents concerning their likelihood to gain information concerning the presidential election from others. The resultant t-value (t = 1.81, d.f 244, one-way) was significant beycnd the .05 level. On the basis of the data the research hypothesis was supported. All data is reported in Table II.

TABLE II

SOURCE OF POLITICAL INFORMATION
HIGH vs. LOW INVOLVEMENT

	Mean Score	t-value	DF	1-Tail Prob.
Television News				
Low Involved	1.46	1.68	244	0.048
High Involved	1.69			
News Magazines				
Low Involved	3.93	-0.25	244	0.403
High Involved	3.87			
Radio				
Low Involved	3.05	2.85	244	0.003
High Involved	3.61			
Television Advertising				
Low Involved	3.60	3.67	244	0.000
High Involved	4.46			
Newspapers				
Low Involved	2.64	-0.12	244	0.453
High Involved	2.61			
Discussions/Conversations				
Low Involved	3.68	1.81	244	0.036
High Involved	4.08			

ASSUMPTION II: A second assumption of this paper is that both high and low involved individuals would find television news more useful than the paid political advertisements of the various candidates. In order to test this assumption, a comparison of the mean of the scores reported by respondents of their perception of the usefulness of television news and paid political ads. A t test was performed for both high and low involved groups. Both t's were significant beyond the .001 level. On the basis of these results, the second major assumption was supported.

HYPOTHESES AREA IV: The final hypotheses area concerned the usefulness of

television news and paid political ads for high and low involved individuals. The study first predicted that high involved respondents perceive television news as a more useful source of information than would low involved subjects. Second, it was predicted that low involved respondents perceive television political advertising as a more useful source of information than would high involved respondents. These predictions were tested by comparing the means of ratings reported by the respondents concerning usefulness of television news and political advertising. Results of mean comparisons confirmed both research hypotheses. t-values and significance levels are reported in Table II.

TABLE III

USEFULNESS OF TELEVISION AS A SOURCE OF POLITICAL INFORMATION
HIGH INVOLVEMENT vs. LOW INVOLVEMENT

	Mean Score	t-value	DF	1-Tail Prob.
TV Network News				
Low Involved	3.90	2.03	244	0.022
High Involved	4.20			
TV Political Advertising				
Low Involved	2.89	-1.65	244	0.050
High Involved	2.58			

DISCUSSION

This paper centers on involvement as a key variable mediating the effects of mass media use in a political campaign. Using a multi-dimensional measure of involvement for the 1980 Presidential election, it was found that there are essentially five dimensions of involvement: cognitive (characterized by recall of campaign issues), affective (characterized by importance of campaign issues), conative (characterized by intention to vote), closeness of the candidates positions (characterized by perceived similarities or differences), and commitment to candidates (characterized by extremity of attitude toward each candidate).

Earlier research showed that mass media effects are dependent on the involvement of the voter. High voter involvement was associated with print as opposed to electronic media and news as opposed to advertising. In this

study, however, high political involvement was found to correlate with television use as opposed to print media. This finding suggests a greater reliance on electronic media for political information among the more politically involved. Furthermore, television news was reported to be more useful than television advertising for political information by those with high political involvement.

The implication of these findings supports the "rational voter" model of political participation. It characterizes the highly involved voter as one who is aware of issues, their importance, intends to vote, and sees differences between the candidate he supports and the other candidate(s). The significant findings indicate that highly involved voters actively choose television news as the most useful source of political information.

This study also found that low involved voters rely extensively on electronic media for their information. One interesting finding was that low involved voters found political advertising to be a more useful source of information than did the high involved. One explanation is that the high involved voter finds no "information" in the advertising of his candidate and perceives the advertising of the opponent as non-credible. Advertising does appeal to the low involved, however, primarily due to 1) their sheer frequency, 2) the lack of effort it takes to watch a 30-second spot and 3) perception is not affected by pre-existing high involved beliefs.

The results of this study are limited to national elections. Presidential elections command media attention. Because no medium is exempt from communicating information during a presidential campaign, there is little a voter can do but be exposed to media coverage. This media blitz may, in part, be responsible for some of the similarities in media use reported by both the high and low involved voter. Since so much of the <u>same</u> information is reported by <u>all</u> media, it is difficult for the respondent to attribute that information to particular media. It is quite likely, for example, that in a local election, the relative importance of television may play a lesser role for voters in favor of newspaper and radio use.

Directions for future research should include a replication of this study on various levels of political election, such as a local city council race, where the media coverage is not as extensive. It would be useful to compare

relative political involvement levels for various types of state and local elections with that of national elections. Also of interest would be a comparison of the findings for media use and political involvement for state and local election.

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APPENDIX A

POLITICAL QUESTIONNAIRE

Telephone Number_____

1. Sex: Male_____ Female_____

2. Strong Demo _____ Democrat _____ Leaning Demo _____ Indep ____ Leaning Repub _____ Repub ____ Strong Repub _____

3. Age Group:

18 - 25 _____	46 - 55 _____
26 - 35 _____	56 - 65 _____
36 - 45 _____	66 and over _____

4. Occupation: _____

5. Can you name political issues being discussed in the Presidential campaign?

(a) _____ (c) _____

(b) _____ (d) _____

6. How would you rate the overall importance of these issues:

Extremely Important	Very Important	Somewhat Important	Not Sure	Somewhat Unimportant	Very Unimportant	Extremely Unimportant
_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____

7. How would you compare the Presidential candidates?

Extremely Different	Very Different	Somewhat Different	Not Sure	Somewhat Similar	Very Similar	Extremely Similar
_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____

8. Do you intend to vote in the Presidential election, November 4?

Yes	Probably	Don't Care	Probably Not	No
_____	_____	_____	_____	_____

9.

	Likely	Somewhat	Not Sure	Somewhat	Unlikely
I will vote for Reagan	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
I will vote for Carter	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
I will vote for Anderson	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____

10. Rank from 1 to 6 the source you use most to obtain information about the Presidential candidates:

TV Network News _____ TV-Paid Political Advertising _____

Newsmagazines _____ Newspapers _____

Radio News _____ Discussions/Conversations _____

11. How would you rate the usefulness of television in informing you about the Presidential candidates?

	Useful	Extremely	Moderately	Not Sure	Moderately	Extremely	Useless
TV Network News		_____	_____	___	_____	_____	
	Useful						Useless
TV Paid Political Ads		_____	_____	___	_____	_____	